

Social media is an opportunity for local government communications

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*Local governments are increasingly using social media to communicate with citizens. **Dean Spurrell** argues that this is not simply another channel used to inform, but an effective way to engage people in two-way communication. The only danger posed to local governments is if they do not adapt.*



Social media has changed the way in which we work, socialise and communicate, but the level of its impact and implications for public relations practitioners is the subject of much debate. Academics such as Gregory, Phillips and Young argue it has revolutionised the role and work of the PR professional while others, including the godfather of PR James Grunig, suggest this 'latest fad' will only revolutionise public relations if a paradigm shift in the thinking of many practitioners and scholars takes place.

My study involving 78 local authorities in England investigated the impact social media has had on local government communications in recent years and whether this will continue in the future.

Is social media just another communications channel?

I wanted to understand whether social media is simply another channel to communicate and engage with residents, or does it have deeper, more far reaching implications for the way local authorities interact with our stakeholders?

Should social media should be given more focus than traditional media channels, what are the limitations or potential dangers to reputations through misuse and what are the implications for those who do not embrace it?

Also, with local government bearing the brunt of the biggest post-war reductions in public spending, can already stretched communications departments find the time and resources to invest in this emerging channel or could social media provide a better, more cost-effective way of utilising (two-way) communications with our stakeholders?

Engage rather than inform

My findings showed social media is alive and well, with the majority of councils (96 per cent) using it and for the small minority who currently do not, 100 per cent plan to do so in the next year. In the majority of cases (88 per cent) they were managed by communications, however in around a third of local authorities it is managed across the organisation.

When asked how they use social media, posting news stories and information (96 per cent) and promoting specific events and campaigns (90 per cent) were the most popular activities. Interestingly, while 41 per cent of authorities monitored forums and blogs, only 28 per cent actively engaged in them.

Over two-thirds of authorities claim to use social media for both one-way and two-way communications while a quarter admit to using it for just one-way communication. Worryingly, only 9 per cent of authorities said they used social media solely for two-way communications, room for improvement if we truly want to engage with our residents rather than inform.

Around two-thirds of authorities have a social media policy; however, around a third of authorities do not have one in place. This is despite advice by LG Communications, DCLG and others that governance and having clear policies and procedures in place can help mitigate the risk of reputational damage through misuse.

Credible communications channel

My study reinforces the growing emergence of social media as a credible communications channel within local government and reflects the changing nature of the way PR practitioners are using this tool to reach out to an evolving audience. As society changes the way it consumes information, practitioners need to adapt the way messages and information are sent and received.

While respondents are quick to profess the virtues of social media, when asked whether it would ever replace traditional communications channels the majority (86 per cent) said no. They argue good communication is about utilising an array of different channels and social media should be used to complement rather than compete with traditional channels.

Mutually beneficial conversations

As social media begins to mature and the initial hype surrounding it subsides, it is clear that it should be regarded as a credible communications channel which complements the other more traditional methods available to PR practitioners.

Used appropriately to a targeted audience with clear messages as part of a planned, strategic campaign social media can be a very powerful, cost-effective communications channel for reaching and engaging with stakeholders.

My research shows that social media works best if supported by traditional media channels creating mutually beneficial conversations which provide an emotional connection, and the return on investment will only be fulfilled if social media is incorporated into the communications mix.

Local government PR practitioners need to set aside their fears and embrace social media – experiment with it, make mistakes, learn and improve. Only then can they fully capitalise on the potential opportunities social media provides to create two-way mutually beneficial conversations.

Social media is not a fad, it is here to stay and the only threat is to those who do not adapt.

Social media tool	% councils using channel
Facebook	93.2
Twitter	97.5
YouTube	62.7
Flickr	47.5
Blogs	28
Podcasts	7.6

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

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